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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 005698

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: 56 KURDISH MAYORS ON TRIAL FOR SUPPORTING ROJTV

REF: A. ANKARA 3676

1B. ANKARA 5608

1C. ANKARA 5640

Classified By: Kelly Degnan, Acting Political Counselor; reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: The trial of 56 popularly-elected Kurdish mayors in Diyarbakir began contentiously on September 26 but has been recessed until November 21. The mayors face up to 15 years of imprisonment each for allegedly supporting terrorism by signing a letter to Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen urging him to resist GOT pressure to shut down Roj TV. (ref A) Although Turkish government officials have long held that Roj TV is a forum for PKK propaganda, virtually all Kurds in Turkey's Southeast watch the channel and support its continued existence. The trial furthers the impression that Turkey is still not prepared to allow free expression on controversial topics, and could further jeopardize the fragile calm that currently exists in the region. End summary.

Trial Begins Contentiously But is Then Postponed By Judge

12. (U) On September 26, the Diyarbakir Heavy Penal Court Number 5 began the trial of 56 mayors charged with supporting the PKK by signing a December 21, 2005, letter to Danish Prime Minister Anders Rasmussen, asking him to resist GOT pressure to shut down Denmark-based Kurdish language station Roj TV. The mayors, all members of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), face up to 15 years of imprisonment each. (ref A)

13. (U) The trial began with the judge reading the indictment to a packed courtroom, which included 46 of the 56 mayors. Several mayors then submitted oral and written defenses. Yenisehir Mayor Firat Anli read aloud a statement, which he said was on behalf of all the defendants, that called the indictment absurd because it asked for 840 years of imprisonment for the signing of a letter containing a mere 405 words. Anli also argued that the indictment had the appearance of a Ministry of Interior inspector's report, rather than an official judicial indictment.

14. (U) The chief judge then read aloud a Ministry of Justice letter that outlined connections of Roj TV to the PKK, such

as the fact that the station broadcast the PKK's annual convention live, and the claim that Roj TV CEO Abdullah Hicap was on the executive board of the PKK. The judge then asked Anli whether it was proper for him to watch such a station given his position as a civil servant of the Turkish state. In response, Baglar Mayor Yurdusev Ozsokmenler pointed out that who owned a TV station would have no bearing on one's decision to watch the station. Kayapinar Mayor Zulkuf Karatekin stated that the mayors signed the letter simply because they stood against the station being shut down, not because they supported terrorism. The judge decided to adjourn the session until November 21, at which time he will allow the testimony of the remaining 10 mayors.

Roj TV Hugely Popular in Turkey's Southeast

¶ 15. (C) Turkish government officials have long held that Roj TV is a propaganda mechanism used to garner support for the PKK. Yuksekova Subgovernor Ugur Kalkar told us in a September 20 meeting that Roj TV brainwashes people to support terrorism. "It's shameful this channel promoting terrorists is allowed," he said. Our Kurdish contacts in the Southeast, however, watch Roj TV, and believe the government's efforts to close it are a way to harass the Kurdish people. Diyarbakir Bar Association Chairman Sezgin Tanrikulu told us, "the fact that every one of the defendants is a publicly elected official from the DTP demonstrates clearly that the Turkish government has brought the case to persecute the Kurdish people." Yuksekova mayor Salih Yildiz told us the government is merely hurting the Kurds by working to close a TV station viewed daily by 20 million Kurds in Turkey. (Note: Although there is no official calculation

ANKARA 00005698 002 OF 002

that would allow confirmation of this number, Post's experience is that Kurdish officials highly inflate such statistics. End note.)

¶ 16. (C) Comment: The trial of 56 popularly elected Kurdish mayors will add to the impression that Turkey is still not prepared to allow free expression on controversial topics, and will inflate the deep mistrust of the central government by the Kurds in Turkey's Southeast. (see reftels) The local Kurds views the central government as hypocritical for devoting resources to this trial while failing to bring all perpetrators to justice in the November 2005 Semdinli bombing or the September 12 Diyarbakir bombing. (see ref C) If the court dismisses the charges when the trial resumes, the blame could be placed on overzealous prosecutors, but a conviction of any of the mayors would further jeopardize the fragile calm that currently exists in the region. End comment.

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